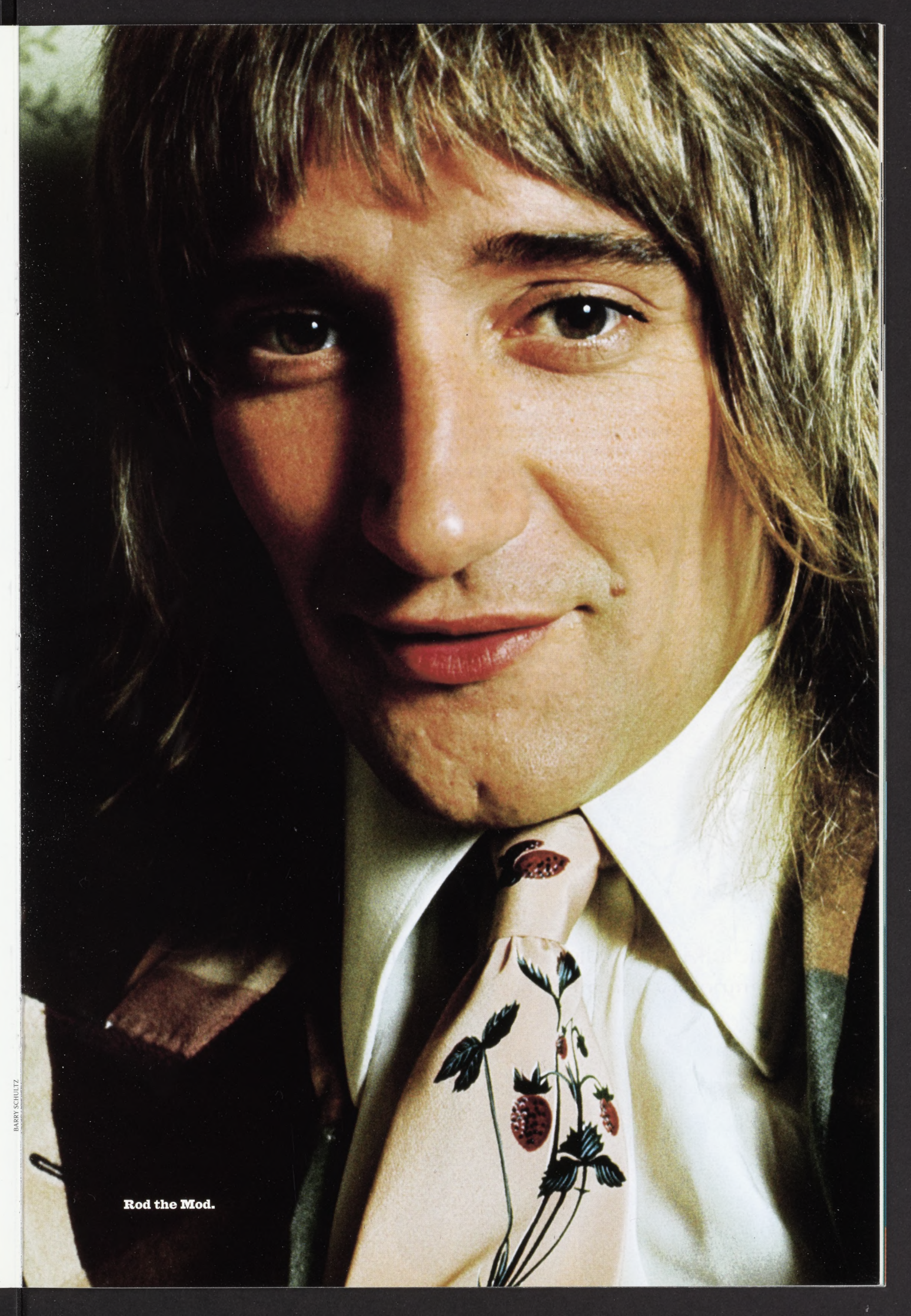


ROD STEWART ART

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In this season of the unplugged, it seems only natural for Rod Stewart, like Eric Clapton and Neil Young, to reintroduce his early work to the MTV generation in a setting more intimate than the arenas to which he's become accustomed. After all, classic songs like "Every Picture Tells a Story," "Mandolin Wind" and "Cut Across Shorty" were never completely plugged in anyway. They rocked with the spirit, if not the sound, of the blues: simply, bawdily, honestly. Delta earthiness was provided by omnipresent slide guitar, and a more homespun Celtic melancholy was evoked by the strings that often echoed the folk-ish melodies. It's a sound that's come around again, as contemporary pop musicians dig for roots. You can hear it in Peter Buck's mandolin on R.E.M.'s "Losing My Religion" or in the violins on 10,000 Maniacs' version of "Because the Night."

At the heart of Rod Stewart's early hits, though, was his unmistakable voice, ragged, unadorned, warm and up-close. Stewart



Rod the Mod.

may now possess the voice of experience, but then, on a song like "Gasoline Alley," it seemed hungry, expectant, vulnerable, with more than a little mischief in it. "Gasoline Alley" a "longing-for-home song," as Stewart has put it, has the ring of autobiography, but it's about locating a feeling, not a place, and that's what Stewart has always done best. (He was apparently unaware of the venerable American comic strip of the same name and its cast of scruffy characters when he wrote it. He confessed to *Rolling Stone* that he nicked the title from a female fan he encountered at the Fillmore West in San Francisco: "We were talking, and she said 'I must get home, because my mother will say, "Where have you been, down Gasoline Alley?"' Stewart's imagination took things from there).

The emotions of "Gasoline Alley," Stewart admits, were inspired by his travels (and travails) as a feckless young troubadour in Spain and Italy. Born at the end of World War II to a North London family with Scottish roots, Stewart mostly had soccer, not music, on his mind. But he grew restless after he landed an apprenticeship on a semi-pro team and, inspired by the bohemian London folk scene of the early sixties, he abandoned ball-playing and hit the road. Armed with a banjo and a harmonica, Stewart played the wandering minstrel until he was

ejected from Spain for a conspicuous lack of funds (and sent home on British Airways, the ticket for which, as the oft-repeated story goes, he has never repaid). Stewart was as much a musical vagabond on the London scene as he

had been on the continent. He found a part-time gig, mostly playing harmonica, with Jimmy Powell and the Dimensions, a Birmingham band that often opened for the Rolling Stones; to make ends meet, he also worked as a frame-maker and a grave digger. Then, bluesman Long John Baldry heard him sing, as Stewart recalls, "on a railway station in Twickenham, London. (I was slightly inebriated.) He vaguely asked me to join his band for the princely sum of 35 pounds a week." Stewart first sang with Baldry in 1965 in the Hootchie Cootchie Men. When that combo fell apart, he followed Baldry to the soul-oriented Steampacket, which also featured Brian Auger and Julie Driscoll. Baldry had been influential in the early careers of many British pop stars, including Stewart's fellow inductee Elton John, allowing them some of their rootsier, bluesier, but largely unrecorded moments. It was Baldry who dubbed Stewart "Rod The Mod" and reminded audiences of the moniker nightly. When Stewart left Baldry's tutelage, he joined Shotgun Express, another soul-and-blues outfit, this time featuring Mick Fleetwood and Peter Green.

Stewart recorded his first solo side in 1964, a version of Sonny Boy Williamson's "Good Morning, Little School Girl," backed by a session band that included John Paul Jones on bass. However, the Yardbirds had also done the number and released it before Stewart even had a chance at the charts. It wasn't until Yardbird Jeff Beck invited him in 1968 to join his new group that Stewart began to establish a reputation as a powerhouse vocalist, particularly in the U.S., where Beck's proto-metal guitar approach had found a serious audience. Stewart's contributions to the Jeff Beck Group took a back seat to Beck's playing, but the exposure led to a solo deal with Mercury Records and to the most important musical relationship of his career, with guitarist and fellow JBG-member Ron Wood.

The Jeff Beck Group was a volatile enterprise, and Beck's professional relationship with Stewart has, over the years, been rocky. (It was smooth sailing most recently with their 1985 voice-and-guitar duet on "People Get Ready.") In 1969, when Beck fired Wood and drummer Mickey Waller, Stewart decided to leave as well. In a seeming game of musical chairs, Wood joined the Small Faces, who had just lost vocalist Steve Marriot to Humble Pie. Wood in turn suggested Stewart front the Faces, who soon dropped the "Small." What has been a psychedelic pop band known for its cult hit, "Itchykoo Park," and one very successful (and craftily merchandised) album, *Ogden's Nut Gone Flake*, was transformed into a raucous and sexy, but far less sinister, Stones-style combo that embraced folk and blues and flaunted an attitude that was pure rock & roll.

Stewart was first introduced to the Faces in a pub and, by all accounts, the quintet took the pub on the road. But Stewart hadn't abandoned his solo aspirations. In fact, he began to lead a double life that could easily confuse the average pop fan: taking center-stage with the Faces

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DAVID STEIN

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while striking out on his own as a solo recording artist with a different set of studio characters, except for Ron Wood, his guitarist, co-writer and full-time foil. To add to the confusion, the Faces incorporated Stewart's solo material into their sets. In a trilogy of records linked by both sound and sentiment — *The Rod Stewart Album* (1969), *Gasoline Alley* (1970), and *Every Picture Tells a Story* (1971) — Stewart established himself as a serious songwriter, whose picaresque tales seemed like slices of ribald but very real life. He was also acclaimed for his soulful interpretations of material carefully chosen from his musical heroes, such as Bob Dylan, Tim Hardin, the Motown writing stable, and even Jagger-Richards. (Check out his wonderfully surreal re-arrangement of "Street Fighting Man" on *The Rod Stewart Album*, a take that Stewart swears had begun as a cover of Little Richard's "The Girl Can't Help It" until Stewart started singing the other lyrics).

"Maggie May," from *Every Picture...*, became his signature and his first Number One single, genuine classic rock that announces itself with its brash opening lines: "Wake up, Maggie. I think I've got something to say to you..." A kiss goodbye from a wistful lover, anchored by a sloppily swinging rhythm section, "Maggie May" almost didn't make it to the airwaves. As Stewart recalls, "It was the B-side from the first single off *Every Picture...* — the A-side being "Reason To Believe" — and if it wasn't for a diligent D.J. in Cleveland who flipped it over, I would've still been digging graves."

Every Picture Tells a Story also hit the top of the *Billboard* album chart, elevating Stewart to the superstar status of artists he used to open for. But he chose to stick with the Faces, a decision that kept him cool in the eyes of the cogniscenti and, more importantly, ensured that he'd have a good time. The Faces were celebrated as a rambunctious live combo, the blueprint for later rule-bending bands like the Replacements. As *Rolling Stone* writer John Morthland put it, "On a bad night, they're probably extra bad, just as they're extra good on a good night... much like the early Stones." Although they were beloved more for their shows than their records, the Faces' *A Nod Is as Good*

as a *Wink* (1971) reached Number Two and the rollicking, raunchy "Stay With Me" became the band's boozy anthem.

Stewart's *Never a Dull Moment* (1972) repeated the success of *Every Picture...* on the album chart, and "You Wear It Well" became a bitersweet successor to "Maggie May." (It also featured a very swingin' cover of Sam Cooke's "Twistin' The Night Away"). *Smiler* (1974) marked the end of Stewart's sessions with his English mates. For the aptly titled *Atlantic Crossing* (1975), his first album for new label Warner Bros, he went to Muscle Shoals, Alabama, to work with the players who had performed on many of the Stax/Volt and Atlantic soul sides Stewart adored. Having come to America a star, Stewart, in a way, never looked back. The Faces, caught between their own legend and Stewart's success, didn't so much break up as drift away around 1975, like the guests at a party that one day had to end. (Wood hooked up with the Stones; drummer Kenny Jones later joined the Who). Stewart was on his own again, the itinerant singer, footloose and, thanks to his constant presence on the charts, fancy free.

Throughout his post-Faces career, Stewart has endured the slings and arrows of critics who missed the intimacy of those early records and rued the day he'd "gone Hollywood." His "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?," arguably one of the seventies' great guilty pleasures, has in particular been the subject of perennial debate among fans and critics alike, although the time seems to have come when one can freely admit to having always dug it. Stewart has had his musical missteps, but he's never failed to rise to the occasion in the presence of a great song. It could be the Sutherland Brothers' "Sailing," Jimi Hendrix's "Angel," Cat Stevens' "The First Cut Is the Deepest," Tom Waits' "Downtown Train," Robbie Robertson's "Broken Arrow" or Van Morrison's "Have I Told You Lately." Or it could be his own Victoria's Secret-style seduction drama, "Tonight's the Night," the Dylanesque "The Killing Of Georgie (Part I and 2)," "You're in My Heart," "Young Turks," "Lost in You," or the graceful and stirring "Forever Young."

Now, after a very strong 1991 studio album, *Vagabond Heart*, Stewart has come full circle. On *Unplugged...and Seated*, with Ron Wood beside him, Stewart has returned to his earliest work for an audience plugged into MTV, where every picture tries to tell a story. Rod only needs to sing.



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Rock's gain is soccer's loss.

—Michael Hill